FBI Accused Of Ignoring Klan Violence

Washington

The FBI had advance knowledge of—but took no action to prevent—instances of Ku Klux Klan violence and other civil liberties violations in the 1960s, a one-time key FBI undercover operative has told Senate investigators.

He is Gary Thomas Rowe Jr., who also says he can testify to details of the FBI's campaign to defame and discredit Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. before the civil rights leader's assassination in 1968.

Rowe, scheduled to be a witness before the Senate Intelligence Committee later this week, joined the Klan at the FBI's request. He worked closely with FBI agents on major cases of racial violence during six years as an undercover man. He participated in violence, he says, with the FBI's knowledge and approval.

He was the government's star witness in a trial at which three Klansmen were convicted of civil rights violations in the March 25, 1965, murder of a white civil rights worker, Viola Liuzzo of Detroit, in Lowndes County, Ala.

Since the trial, Rowe, now a private detective, has been living under an assumed name in southern California.

Interviewed in the presence of his attorney by the Los Angeles Times, Rowe recounted details of a lengthy deposition he had given Senate investigators.

His account of FBI activities raises questions not only about past abuses, but about the current status of FBI men who participated in those abuses. He said he could identify agents who took part in the anti-King campaign and other abuses.

At his news conference last Wednesday, President Ford said the campaign against King was "abhorrent to all Americans."

"Whether or not we can identify the individuals, if they are still alive, is difficult, but I certainly will consult with the attorney general regarding that matter," he said.

Rowe said some FBI men who participated in civil liberties violations not only are still alive, but are still with the FBI.

He said he decided to tell his story to the Senate committee because the FBI had failed to give him a lifetime government job

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and fulfill other promises he said the bureau made to him in return for his undercover work.

Among Rowe's allegations, some of which the Times has corroborated from other sources and all of which he and his attorney say he is prepared to testify to before the committee, are the following:

• The FBI participated in at least a dozen cases of electronic surveillance involving churches and Klansmen's homes, as well as a motel room King was staying in.

• He gave the FBI three weeks advance notice that the Klan, in conspiracy with Birmingham police, was planning to assault Freedom Riders in 1961 in Birmingham. The FBI apparently never relayed the warning to the Justice Department and the assault occurred without federal intervention. (Freedom Riders tested segregation barriers in interstate buses and terminals.)

• Klansmen and the Jefferson county sheriff's office, with the FBI's advance knowledge, "planted" evidence of illegal liquor at an integrated country club. The club was padlocked after a sheriff's raid seized the "planted" evidence.

• Klansmen had access to Birmingham police files on civil rights leaders and also rode around in Birmingham police cars planning violence, all with the FBI's knowledge.

Rowe said FBI agents told him they had bugged King's motel room and had damaging information about him, including photographs showing him in "compromising situations."

He quoted one of the agents as saying that J. Edgar Hoover, who served as FBI director for almost a half century until his death in 1971, "hated King with a purple passion."

The agent, according to Rowe, said Hoover had resented criticism that King had expressed about the FBI and had used the damaging information to "literally blackmail" the civil rights leader into silence about the bureau.

In addition to other major cases, Rowe worked on the Sept. 15, 1963, Birmingham church bombing that killed four black girls attending Sunday school.

He disclosed that he gave the FBI the names of eight Klansmen suspected of being involved in the bombing. Later, he said, he furnished the FBI with the name of a state investigator he said had urged him to tell one of the Klansmen to "keep his goddam mouth shut" if questioned about the bombing.

The bombing case has never been solved.

Rowe said that when first recruited by the FBI in 1960 he was told he was to "participate in no violence whatsoever."

"This went on for several months," he said, "and then they said 'Look, there's crap going on that you're not reporting.'"

He said he explained that he could not get information on violence by merely attending Klan meetings, that he would have to participate in what the Klan called "missionary work" and this would put him in jeopardy if he did not join in the violence.

"They said, 'Well, we have to tell you by law that you can't get involved, but we . . . know you are gonna have to get involved. You have to get the information, that's the main thing.'

"So after that I became very active in the missionary work," Rowe said, "but each and every time I would report to the FBI what we were going to do. And nothing was ever done about it."

Rowe said he told the FBI about meetings he'd held with Birmingham police arranging a Klan "reception" for Freedom Riders when they traveled to Alabama in 1961.

The arrangement was for a Klan mob armed with clubs to be given 15 minutes in which to assault the Freedom Riders before any police would arrive on the scene. He said he passed the information on to the FBI.

The assault took place in Birmingham on Mother's Day, May 14, 1961. Rowe said several FBI agents observed the attack, including two agents who took moving pictures of it.

The late Eugene (Bull) Connor, who was Birmingham police commissioner, later told reporters police were not on the scene because it was Mother's Day and the police were at home with their mothers.

Burke Marshall, a Yale law school professor who was director of the Justice Department's civil rights division at the time, said U.S. marshals would have been dispatched to the scene or other action taken if the department had been alerted to the planned violence, but that no such warning was received.

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GARY ROWE
EX-FBI operative